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Chile: Aylwin Feeling Heat on Human Rights [redacted]

New evidence of human rights violations during the Pinochet era is complicating President Aylwin's moderate approach to the issue and straining civil-military relations. Recent discovery in Pisagua of a mass grave for leftists executed by the military after the 1973 coup has sparked public outrage and led to growing debate among political parties over the human rights issue. Center-left politicians within the ruling coalition reportedly feel compelled to pay lip service to more extreme positions to retain the moral high ground, despite their fear of undermining civil-military relations. The moderate right, meanwhile, is stressing the need for reconciliation, arguing that dwelling on the past will jeopardize political stability. The far left is seizing the issue to press for Army Commander Pinochet's removal and the repeal of his 1978 Amnesty Law, which protects human rights violators. Leftist extremists are demonstrating their desire for retribution through assassination of former Pinochet security officials allegedly involved in human rights abuses. The Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front-Dissident faction recently claimed responsibility for the 21 March assassination attempt on retired Air Force General Gustavo Leigh and the murder of retired National Police Colonel Luis Fontaine on 10 May. [redacted]

The widespread criticism has put the military on the defensive, highlighting its discomfort with Aylwin's human rights policy. The Army has publicly criticized the government's handling of events, claiming that the "civil war" after the 1973 coup justified repression—a position recently echoed by the previously moderate Navy chief. The Air Force chief has publicly admitted that his service committed abuses during Pinochet's rule. [redacted]

Although the outcry over Pisagua caught the government off-guard, Aylwin has moved quickly to limit damage. [redacted] the administration's initial reaction to a Supreme Court decision to investigate the atrocity was uncoordinated, with one minister criticizing the Court's failure to investigate other military abuses. Aylwin, however, has since reduced political tensions by consulting with church, military, and opposition party representatives and highlighting the military's stated willingness to cooperate in the investigations. [redacted]

Despite such efforts, political fallout is likely to narrow Aylwin's maneuvering room on key items of his domestic agenda relating to human rights and the military, such as judicial reform. Although outcry over Pisagua has justified Aylwin's creation last April of a commission to investigate human rights abuses, it also reveals the difficulties he probably will have in trying to satisfy Chileans with the pace and scope of investigations. Moreover, further revelations of past atrocities in the coming months will raise the risk that the far left will demonstrate its frustration with Aylwin's moderate approach through increased terrorist activity. [redacted]